



Jean Charles Boisset, proprietor of Raymond Vineyards, in the room where visitors can take part in the Winemake for a Day program which lets them create a custom blend of wine. *J.L. Sousa/Register photos*

The Frenchman among us

Jean Charles Boisset makes his mark in the valley

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Lady Gaga has nothing on Jean-Charles Boisset.

I'm sitting across from Boisset in the opulent JCB Club at Raymond Winery in Rutherford. Lunch is being served on a marble table as we drain Baccarat crystal flutes containing JCB No. 69, a sparkling pinot noir from Burgundy. Boisset is resplendent in a sort of reptilian sport coat and black silk v-neck. Joining us is his sister Nathalie, just off the plane from France.

Behind Boisset, Lady Gaga strains for attention on a wall-sized video screen that continually plays only videos by either the pop diva or Michael Jackson. All eyes, however, are focused on Boisset as he radiates an energy level that reduces Gaga to mere background noise.

"Wine today is about having a great time," Boisset said. "Having a guy or lady so serious or snobby behind the table, I don't think it works."

The JCB Club supports that philosophy in lavish fashion. The contemporary furnishings are swathed in shiny gold upholstery, a stuffed leopard stands on one of many marble tables next to a stack of presumably faux goldbricks.

The club is one of several over-the-top tasting venues at Ray-

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Raymond Vineyards

- 849 Zinfandel Lane, St. Helena
- Open daily 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
- For information visit
- raymondvineyards.com or call 963-3141.



Dramatic lighting and costumed mannequins, above, are featured in the fermentation room of Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena. Visitors to Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena can pass through the Corridor of the Senses, left, where they can experience the different aromas found in wines.

Boisset

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mond that are anything but "serious or snobby." The Red Room is like visiting an old San Francisco bordello, with its flocked wallpaper and velvet furnishings. The Crystal Cellar has a hip, Euro-club feel with crystal chandeliers hanging among stainless steel tanks bathed in colored lights. Out front, the traditional tasting room seems like just a holding area for the more exciting attractions inside.

As Boisset pours a glass of Raymond chardonnay, the gilded video screen behind him shows Gaga pounding the piano while supporting a massive purple headdress and pink masquerade eye-wear. Ho, hum.

People working for Boisset seem energized by their enthusiastic boss who provides a constant stream of ideas and inspirations emanating from his unquestionable passion for the wine business. And like Lady Gaga, Boisset's flamboyance and high-energy persona seems supported by an intuitive talent and a solid vision of where he and his family's wine business are going.

As president of Boisset Family Estates, started by his parents in 1961, Boisset has been the driving force behind the Burgundy-based company's expansion into California. In 2003, the company purchased DeLoach Vineyards in the Russian River area then Raymond Vineyards in Rutherford in 2009. Last year the company bought the historic Buena Vista winery in Sonoma then purchased the Lockwood brand in Monterey. During this decade-long shopping spree Boisset married winemaker Gina Gallo and the couple became parents of twin daughters. In 2011, Boisset



Jean Charles Boisset, proprietor of Raymond Vineyards in St. Helena, in the winery's Red Room. J.L. Sousa/Registrar

and Gallo purchased the former home of Robert and Margrit Mondavi on Wappo Hill near Yountville.

Boisset and his sister are also active proponents of organic and biodynamic farming practices, which are used on most of their winery properties throughout the world. Boisset is well versed on the benefits of biodynamics and speaks regularly about the subject to environmental and agricultural organizations.

Although Boisset Family Estates owns 25 wineries in France and the U.S., Boisset spends most of his time concentrating on the California properties.

"He's not that French any more," sister Nathalie jokes. "He's more Californian. He went on the other side."

At that moment, fellow Frenchman and renowned Napa Valley chef Michel Cornu comes into the club to explain the main luncheon course - lamb sweetbreads and duck gizzards with baby bok choy and carrots plucked that morning from the Raymond garden - very French and very tasty.

"And our famous Laguiole knife, which is one

of our partners," Boisset injected, noting that Raymond also works with Baccarat glassware, Gaggenau appliances and other high-end products. Like product placement on a hit TV show, the pricy merchandise seems quite at home in the upscale Raymond setting.

To Boisset, expanding his family's wine business into the U.S. was far more than a business decision.

"One way could be that you stay on one estate," he said, "you have a great time, you perpetuate what you have and you don't want to grow it. But I, personally, got very lucky. I've always wanted to get out of the house - for all kinds of reasons but the primary reason is that I love adventure. I love travelling, I love the people, and I love languages."

Raised on the family's historic wine estate in Burgundy, Boisset developed a fascination with America at an early age.

"I had grandparents who were very involved in the war and very grateful to the Americans. They were always telling me 'Go to the U.S. This is the place to go... this is a dream place. You

should spend more time there.'"

Boisset's first visit to California's wine country was on a family trip in 1981. The stop at Buena Vista in Sonoma made a lasting impression, he said, and perhaps helped shape the vision that drives Boisset and his family's business today.

"What is exciting to is to be constantly with people communicating this love of wine that we have," he said. "And it's not just wine and food pairing. What is fascinating today, I believe, is to bring experience, fun and education to it. It's not just about wine and food."

Boisset said that while the American consumer's knowledge and interest in food and wine has grown tremendously in recent years, the industry needs to continue to stoke this enthusiasm.

"Today, as winery people, we have a lot of ground to cover to take people to the next transcendental experience, to make them vibrate into their unique moment where we can hopefully wake something specific."

He said that is the point of attractions like Raymond's blending room where, dressed in silver metallic jumpsuits, visitors learn how different varietals affect wine flavor and characteristics by creating a personal blend that is bottled and custom labeled. The two-acre Theater of Nature is a whimsical and educa-

tional look at biodynamic farming and how all of the "actors" play crucial roles in the production of high-quality wine.

"We have amazing properties, and we want to create experiences for the whole family to have a great time, to educate themselves, to play, to enjoy and to keep giving them a reason to come back."

Variety is the "je ne sais quoi" of life, however, and Boisset wants to provide different experiences unique to each individual winery.

"What we're doing at Raymond is very different than what we are putting in place at Buena Vista," he said. "At Buena Vista, we are bringing the history of California together, including the native Americans, the Missions, the Gold Rush - the whole evolution of the (Buena Vista) Viticultural Society of the Count (Agoston Haraszthy de Mokesa), the founder of Buena Vista, all the way to our restoration of the California's first gravity-flow winery over there."

"That's very important to put that forward, you know," sister Nathalie added, "because foreigners - French people or whomever - are not really aware of the history of California wine. It's so old."

"At DeLoach," Boisset continued, "we are fully going into the pure organic and biodynamic aspects - the great, perfect farm in the Russian River. Our rankings on our '08 and '09 pinot noir and zinfandel are very high, and we feel that we can take someone through a 20-wine tasting of pinot, chardonnay and zinfandel."

Boisset clearly represents a new generation of wine entrepreneur who sees beyond traditional boundaries and attitudes.

"We were raised with a very strong American spirit," he said, gesturing toward his sister, "and I've always wanted for us as a family to have a bi-cultural allure and presence. I really believe America and France work beautifully together."

"You can do business anywhere," he continued. "If you really wanted to do the business you should be

making wine in China probably today. California is an expensive place to make wine, but for us as a family I see it as an amazing chance to bring two cultures together and bring vibration and magnetic forces into the world we live in. It goes far beyond just doing business."

Boisset grabbed a bottle of his new JCB wine to pour yet another taste as the luncheon wound down. Lady Gaga seemed to be clawing to get on the other side of the video screen.

"The entire JCB line is only about style and words," he said. "We don't complicate it with what vineyard it comes from or the vinification technique. We've been very successful with that."

Labels carry a numeric name, the varietal or blend and three descriptive words. JCB No. 7 is described as "Debonair, Charismatic and Seductive." The No. 7 refers to Boisset's age when he first snuck a taste of older Burgundies at a dinner party given by his parents. JCB No. 81, a chardonnay, signifies 1981, the year Boisset first visited California. The wine is described as "Alluring, Ephemeral and Insatiable," three words that also may apply to Boisset's first impression of the region he now calls home.

From his early childhood in the lush vineyards of Burgundy, Boisset said he has been keenly aware of the importance of terroir in both winemaking and life in general.

"Terroir is always that trinominal relationship between the soil, the plant and the climate," he said, "but ultimately it is really passion and people."

Boisset might amend that definition to include a sense of history and a vision of the future.

"One reason we were interested in buying the property on Wappo Hill," he said, "is that it is a historical landmark of Napa Valley. It is the highest mountain on the valley floor where the Indians used to be strategically positioned to observe what was happening here."

An appropriate vantage point, perhaps, for someone with his eyes locked on the future.